

Sarah O'Hern

Analyzing Sex and Gender Identity through Attire, Behavior, and Environment in Virginia

Woolf's *Orlando*

Published a year before *Orlando*, *To the Lighthouse* had earned for Virginia Woolf the attention from critics that would forever mark her as a serious writer. Receiving mixed reviews at the time, one keen critic discerned that, while lacking the clarity of prose she had achieved in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the work imparted a loftier ambition through the scope of its artistic vision, further arguing that “as an author develops he will always break down the perfection he has achieved in an earlier stage of his writing in order to reach new objectives” (Book Marks). Her readership thus anticipated more experimentation from an author who would go on to develop a character whose very existence challenges notions of identity and selfhood and whose extraordinary life seems to embody the whole of “the exact complexion of that intangible moment, a combination of past and future, of objective reality and subjective consciousness, which we refer to as the present.” Relying on the seminal gender theory of Judith Butler, the aim of this paper is to both compartmentalize and criticize elements of *Orlando* that can in turn offer greater insight into the implications of sex and gender identity, those belonging to Woolf's era as well as that of the current, through three separate sections: attire, behavior, and environment. In so doing, the discoveries and perspectives offered will contribute to the long and ever more complex traditions of feminist criticism, specifically towards that of Woolf and her equally complex body of work.

Gender and Attire

Writing in Argentina as a Jewish Astro-Hungarian refugee during the Second World War, novelist Stefan Zweig reflected during his exile upon the dramatic transformation of dress

between men and women, which he had witnessed occur between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and which he believed demonstrated the disruption of European gender roles as they had been traditionally expressed. Garments, much as they did for those of Woolf's culture, functioned as a way of exaggerating the polarities of attributes ascribed to men and women who were expected to perform their respective tropes: the headstrong man striding with purpose in his high-collared buttoned suit and the diffident woman whose figure was covered, swaddled, and bound in such a way "that even at the wedding breakfast her bridegroom had not the faintest idea whether his future companion for life was straight or crooked, plump or thin, had short legs or long legs" (Zweig 94). Conversely, that which was considered appropriate dress for both men and women of the post-Great War era entered a state of veritable androgyny. Bodies were no longer mannequins upon which old world ideals of decent society could be animated as the effects of the war thus threw forever into flux the once static notion of masculine and feminine qualities, allowing men and women, "both of them tall and slim, both beardless and short-haired" (95), to engage in an equality of sorts through the casual ease of interaction, and which was ostensibly achieved through the gender neutrality of their appearance.

Perhaps inevitably, this androgynous state required for women to take on a more masculine appearance as though doing so suggested an inherent neutrality of gender by their lacking those physical qualities deemed conspicuously feminine (e.g., the eschewing of the dramatic waist emphasis achieved through corsets fashionable during the nineteenth century in favor for a straighter silhouette). Rather, in her famous lectures given at two separate women's colleges, Woolf approached the problem that arises when a society insists that these marked outward differences are an indication of an inward difference between men and women while also casting doubt upon whether the sympathy of thought they may share is achieved solely

through a superficial change of appearance. Woolf recalls an experience, in a manner similar to a scene as occurs in the closing pages of *To the Lighthouse*, of watching a young couple in London, a girl and a man, both of them separate and self-absorbed, entering a taxicab and driving together in their shared vessel as though pulled along by an imagined current presumably towards the same destination. Though an otherwise unremarkable incident, Woolf was struck by its impact upon her imagination as it demonstrated for her the mistake that is made when one sees the designs of one sex as being wholly separate from that of the other; that perhaps “to think... of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind” (ROO 97).

The idea of a “unity of the mind,” a state in which distinctions between masculine and feminine thinking obscures into the human, occupies much of Woolf’s work and is one she exhausted to its fullest extent in *Orlando*, itself a text that blurs distinctions between genres as thoroughly as it disrupts traditional notions of gender identity. Though the plot spans several centuries and features a character whose fluctuating sense of self operates under the reader’s perpetual scrutiny, recurring as a welcome grounding motif is the inclusion of gems, “which constantly change their lights and facets but remain essentially intact” (Fleishman 143), just as Orlando is an amalgamation of the facets of gender characteristics ascribed to the masculine and feminine. Gems thus exist within the novel as a way of conveying the complexities of a single character who encompasses, both within and without, an array of seemingly contradictory appearances and whose equally varied interiority resists the simplified categorization offered by the gender binary. However, the binary perceptions of gender by ancillary characters are precisely what determines the experiences of the central protagonist as they ride the crest and fall of their remarkably long life from one of masculine action to feminine passivity.

Woolf establishes early for the reader the evolution taking place within gender expression as men and women were required to negotiate the enactment of their gender through their respective attire, each according to the standards unique to their era. The narrator, or biographer, introduces Orlando as the typical specimen of Elizabethan masculinity in a tone that is unequivocal as to the certainty of his sexual identity: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (13). Worth noting, excluding the implications of the role of violence in the demonstration of one's masculinity, is the anxious connotation embedded in "disguise," a word which suggests that Woolf was conscious of the shifting standards of dress of her own era as it was itself beginning to convey an obscuring of gender lines traditionally thought to be rigidly affixed to one's sex. Speaking further to the ambiguities of her age and contrasted against the simple facticity of male violence characterizing that of the Elizabethan, Woolf reflects how "the accent on sex has changed within living memory," and which led "to the destruction of a great deal of dead matter still obscuring the true features of the human face" (*The Collected Essays* 23). By acknowledging the many varied lenses of perception made available to those living in the modern era, Woolf thus argues that the biographer can no longer rely on a one-dimensional reading of their subject and as such must allow for a more nuanced, even contradictory, understanding of their subject's identity, which will ostensibly bring to that subject a "richer unity."

Orlando's appearance is thus susceptible to an equally nuanced reading. Before the arrival of Queen Elizabeth, Orlando enjoys the solitude afforded by the English countryside; "I am alone," (18) he rhapsodizes as he takes into himself the life and fertility of his surroundings and traces of his identity as a man of means all but dissolve. It isn't until hearing the royal

trumpet's signal that Orlando recalls himself and, upon returning to his room, abandons his stockings and jerkin for "crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias" (20-21). The enaction resumes and the figure who inspires such grand displays of dress, that of the Queen, bears equal pomp and showy ostentation. Woolf thus demonstrates the importance of attire as being central to communicating not just the decorum owed of the moment, but also the conveyance of gender between peoples; Orlando requires the Queen's presence to communicate masculine courtliness just as the Queen requires Orlando's presence to communicate feminine royalty. The variability of dress, moreover, as being either demonstrably masculine or feminine changes according to the era. Thus, as Judith Butler argues, "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (9).

However, adding further disruption to the links between sex and gender, Woolf imposes upon Orlando a sudden and inexplicable transformation from male to female, revealing an implicit criticism held by the author toward the literary traditions that have since endowed the feminine with virtues that are as exalting as they are restrictive. Three feminine figures, Purity, Chastity, and Modesty, engage Orlando's transubstantiation in a ritual steeped in chivalric symbolism as the divine women look upon the scene in scorn, indicating with their departure the completion of Orlando's evolution, or degradation, as well as the end of one literary era heralding the beginning of another. Yet, once naked and alone, Orlando's gender identity remains somewhat ambiguous. The biographer maintains the use of the "he" pronoun, describing his body as "combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (138). The very

presence of the biographer, and of the reader, requires for sense to be made of Orlando's new state, just as Butler holds that "bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender," prompting the question to thus arise, "to what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?" (12).

The answer, unsurprisingly, is that the intelligibility of gender, as well as the language available for its discussion, is "socially instituted" and is therefore traditionally determined from without according to the norms and expectations of a society rather than pronounced from and by the sexed subjects themselves (Butler 23). Nevertheless, Woolf addresses the sudden and miraculous transformation with nonchalance, allowing others to wrestle with the aberrations of nature such a sex-change entails and thus concluding: "Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same" (138). Orlando proceeds with the business of living in full acceptance of her new reality, dressing herself in an androgynous manner with "those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (139). Among the Thessalian people, Orlando enjoys the ambiguity of her position through dress and the ambivalence treated toward that of sex in a culture far removed from the one she's known thus far.

However outwardly her appearance may have changed, Orlando ultimately returns to the Western world, whose customs obstinately remain, and she learns of the implications of dependency through her new life as a female, and which inevitably results in the relinquishment of the freedom of movement she once enjoyed as a male. Once aboard the aptly named *Enamored Lady*, much of Orlando's inner dialogue is a musing of what it means to be a civilized female, its stark shift in expectations, doing so from a place of intellectual detachment with a

unified mind. Having exchanged her Turkish trousers for a coiled skirt, she experiences firsthand the “penalties and privileges of her position” (153) within moments and, musing upon the value of chastity, swings a careless ankle toward an unsuspecting sailor who nearly falls from the ship’s mast in shock, with Orlando comically resolving that “If the sight of my ankles means death to an honest fellow who, no doubt, has a wife and family to support, I must, in all humanity, keep them covered” (157). The scene is valuable insofar that it demonstrates, with perfect honesty, the inanities encountered by men and women when dress intervenes and informs the manner in which interactions unfold within a society whose gender roles are clearly defined and starkly opposed and to which women have habitually been martyred.

Thus, the construction of one’s gender is unavoidably linked to the freedoms and constraints of expression attained through attire. As Orlando’s biographer thus notes, though ostensibly trivial, “clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (187). This sentiment demonstrates the tension that remains ever present throughout Woolf’s work, a tension which she moreover seeks to reconcile with her belief in the “unity of the mind,” a state of being that suspends itself above the gender binary as an ultimately sexless entity, having no need for such useless categories as feminine and masculine. Woolf’s frustration with this prevailing tension between sex and gender is further evidenced in the biographer’s assertion that, “in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above” (189).

Owing to the complexity with which Woolf treats her own views on the outward expression of sex and identity, feminist theorists have naturally produced a variety of

interpretations and readings reflecting the obscurities still shrouding the topic. In her essay detailing the varied feminist receptions of Woolf, Laura Marcus cites the criticisms of Elaine Showalter, who argues that the “myth” of androgyny was an act of self-defense by the author, which “helped her to evade her own painful femaleness”; Marcus counters by adding the thoughts of Toril Moi, who reads Woolf’s insistence in the existence of multiple perspectives and identities within a single character rather as a response to patriarchal concepts of an “old stable ego,” which seeks to position the human experience from an inherently fixed, masculine point of view (230-31). These opposing readings serve to illustrate the precarity of interplay between sex and gender, and subsequently the history of its expression through attire, and which Butler believes indicates “that gender as a substance, the viability of man and woman as nouns” (33) is thus deserving of the scrutiny it receives.

Gender and Behavior

Examining gender roles as expressed through Victorian poetry, Carol Christ presents the “angel of the house” as one who exemplifies ideal feminine values and who is subsequently an often-recurring figure in Woolf’s work. Implicit in the word “angel” are connotations of otherworldly qualities that render its feminine subject abstract and therefore without her owning substantive identity. The Victorian woman of Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House” is such a one-dimensional entity whose passivity and temperance serves to contrast the more anxious and active pursuits of her male counterpart: “the very ambivalence that the poem reveals about male achievement thus explains its idealization of feminine passivity; it frees woman from the obligation of accomplishment that man finds so burdensome” (Christ 149). Thus, in the angel, the Victorian man finds his brief respite from a culture of unrelenting expectations for success devoid of any intrinsic worth; she’s a revitalizing oasis from the desert harshness of

industrial capitalism, a sanctuary in which “he can find and worship a creature that he conceives to be free from those conflicting desires and thus find some salvation from them” (152).

Though *Orlando* opens during the Elizabethan age, Woolf was writing in the shadow cast by these Victorian sensibilities, which were further contrasted against the anxieties of the modern era whose public had seen the horrors of the First World War as well as serious disruptions in gender relations, with greater numbers of women joining men in the labor force and earning their own wages for the first time. However, detailing the sexual revolution since its dubious inception during the Victorian era, Kate Millet demonstrates the varied ways in which women’s subjugation had been received by writers of the age, particularly that of John Stuart Mill and John Ruskin, two men, respectively “rational and chivalrous,” each of whom claiming, “to have at heart the best interest of both sexes and the larger benefit of society” (121). The ruling patriarchy of the Victorian era found in Ruskin a champion for the continued infantilization of women, whom Ruskin sincerely believed benefitted from their subjugation and would continue to do so were it not for the feminist agenda pushed by harridans who were then advocating for gender reform. Mill, however, presented a far more humane and honest depiction of women’s struggles in his essay “The Subjection of Women,” which attacks “the conditions of legal bondage, debilitating education, and the stifling ethic of ‘wifely subjection’ within the Victorian period” (123-24).

In the narration of *Orlando*, one senses the obligation of the biographer to resist taking such divisive stances as those intoned by Ruskin and Mill. Rather, in an effort to instill a “richer unity,” the biographer sidles past the need for moralizing about a culture founded upon masculine violence and caprice, instead rationalizing the custom as being a product of its time, and whose distinct dichotomies of life were perhaps even enviable:

The age was the Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even. Everything was different. The weather itself, the heat and cold of summer and winter, was, we may believe, of another temper altogether. The brilliant amorous day was divided sheerly from the night as land from water... The withered intricacies and ambiguities of our more gradual and doubtful age were unknown to them. Violence was all. (26-27)

Orlando's behavior receives an equal level of ambivalence; quite simply, "he was boyish; he did but as nature bade him" (28), indulging his impulses without care. The women of Orlando's early life, however numerous, remain nameless in the records, appearing only as a faceless swathe of maids and ladies save for that of Clorinda, Favilla, and Euphrosyne, each of whom representing poetic devices found in medieval sonnets; though their names are recorded, their presence is only one of utility, not to be of earnest interest to the reader.

However, this isn't to suggest that Woolf personally subscribed to such over-simplified sentiments on gender behavior, nor did she endorse the notion that the only natural sexual attraction exists between men and women. On the contrary, *Orlando* is a testament to the author's belief in a sexual attraction transcending that of the gender binary and into the spiritual. Woolf dedicates the novel outright to Vita Sackville-West, a woman with whom she had a passionate love affair and who serves as the main inspiration and model for the title-character. Thus, critic Derek Ryan cites Sherron Knopp's characterization of Woolf's *Orlando* as serving multiple functions: it's one of a "'public proclamation' and 'a way to heighten intimacy' between Woolf and Sackville-West, 'not as a substitute for physical lovemaking but an extension of it'" (101). Perhaps more importantly, Orlando as a character is to be read as one whose central identity subsumes the individual with the multiple, an act of "depersonalization" that intensifies

potential interactions between self and others rather than ridding them entirely of substance (105). Therefore, any inclusions by the author of conventional forms of gender behavior can be safely read as a criticism of strictly Victorian heterosexual expectations and mores.

The first significant disruption of such gender behavior comes in the form of Princess Sasha, whom Orlando first mistakes for a boy, so strong a skater is she, until upon closer inspection he discovers: "Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had those eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea" (38). Unlike the women he had previously courted, Orlando finds in the Princess a woman with whom he could speak and interact as lovers and not as a passionless courtier to a "nodding mass of lace and ceremony" (40). Though the relationship awakens in Orlando his own supposed masculinity, translated as an unquenchable thirst for action, the Princess's subsequent infidelity causes an equal and opposite reaction of lethargy and melancholic introspection. The betrayal is crucial to Orlando's growth, as it's in the solitude of the tombs of his forebearers that he first confronts the role of death in rendering the once living sexless, all the while waxing philosophic as to whether a skeleton's hand once "urged the war horse, or plied the needle?" (71). Ultimately, the questioning yields no answers, and Orlando is spurred on by other distractions. The ambiguities of gender prove to be too onerous an undertaking for the protagonist in this stage of his development, but the imminent realization of gender behavior as socially constructed rather than innate isn't abandoned so much as delayed.

Orlando's subsequent transformation offers to him a more nuanced understanding of the complexities comprising a woman's life in the Western world; that of her, and of Woolf's, eternal warring over the desire for protection afforded to upper-class women by patriarchal coddling as well as negotiating, and more often suppressing, the universal human drive for action

and intellectual pursuit, which is denied to them by that same coddling. Having now operated from both the masculine and feminine perspective, Orlando thus exemplifies the English literary tradition as deepening its own character, though posing greater ambiguity as a result. Aboard the *Enamored Lady*, Orlando must reckon with the views she once held as a man, having once insisted that “women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled” (156), she now recognizes that women aren’t, in fact, “obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature” (157). Moreover, this duality of gender perspective isn’t experienced as a sustained “unity of the mind” but rather as an unstable vacillation between the two:

“For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity... she was so rapt and enchanted that it was as if a cannon ball had exploded at her ear when a man’s voice said, ‘Permit me, Madam,’ a man’s hand raised her to her feet ” (161).

Patriarchy so disrupts Orlando’s reverie in the form of the ship’s captain, who indicates their arrival to England. The disruption is one of many Orlando will experience as a female as Woolf so conveys the sex as having to gradually carve a place for itself within a predominately masculine literary tradition, not as a continuation of prevailing modalities, but rather as a subcategory achieved through the cautious investigation better suited for the unexpressed experiences of women as “something intricate and many-chambered, which one must take a torch to explore, in prose not verse” (175).

Orlando’s situation, however, is a curious mixture of privilege and dependency, owing to the privileges of her class coupled with the dependency of her sex. Jill Conway, examining the

prevailing discourse of eighteenth and nineteenth century sensibilities toward sex and gender, details the ways in which science was used to validate female subservience as a biological necessity rather than as a mere social or political convention. According to the argument, men naturally have greater aptitudes in the realms of physical and mental endurance and “were thus activists and excelled in the species-preserving capacities of egoism. Women on the other hand possessed the social talents. They were superior to men in constancy of affection and sympathetic imagination” (146-47). There’s a flattering element to the idea of a woman excelling over a man in one aspect of human faculties, which was also ostensibly meant to be therefore ennobling; but positioning the sexes as having opposing yet complementary abilities betrays the insecurities inherent within performative machismo to which women were, and in many cases still are, both audience and hostage. Rather, the position of women was a useful benchmark to console male fears of inadequacy, a role historically imposed upon women which Woolf only somewhat facetiously characterizes in *A Room* as “looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35).

Despite this tension, however, both the men and women of *Orlando* learn to discuss potentially delicate subject matters through a shared sympathy of thought, and which was imparted through ambiguity and subtlety of language. In one such instance, Orlando determines the admission of sexual impropriety by one of her male guests only by virtue of what he omits (258). The Victorian preoccupation of marriage, moreover, made decent the “natural sympathies” between men and women that would otherwise be considered indecent and Orlando, though in search of a lover, acquiesces to the conventions of her age and finds a husband in the form of Shelmerdine. However, critic Derek Ryan views her eventual marriage not as a total submission to conventions of gender roles, but rather as her achieving a balance of sorts in her

refusal to “to uphold the opposition between terms [that of ‘lover’ and ‘husband’], and therefore refusing the submit to a dualistic conceptualization of love that fully obeys the conventions of the time” (112). In this way, Woolf demonstrates the compromises that must be made by individuals in a society, especially for that of women, if they expect to enjoy the company of the other sex and to know the particular comforts, both emotional and financial, made available through marital unions.

Gender and Environment

Though a work defined by the experiences of a central character informed along lines of gender expression and identity, integral to *Orlando* are the spaces in which these interactions occur, which, in many ways, predetermine the shape of the interaction set to take place and which impart the role played by England as a nation, with its distinct ideas of its own history and culture, in the shape-making process. Reflecting upon the literary legacy of Henry James, Woolf muses how the author must have felt when confronted with the existential threat posed by the Great War against his homeland, “the rare, the sole, the exquisite England” (*The Collected Essays* 81). As Janis Paul notes, there exists an undeniable affection for tradition in Woolf’s novels just as much as there exists a desire to frustrate those traditions through experimentation; yet, ultimately, Woolf’s works reaffirm “the Victorian values of time, place, history, society, and things in themselves as the only points of survival and unity in a fragmenting world” (6). In this regard, in reading James’s inner dialogue, one can recognize the same sentiments Woolf undoubtedly shared as a fellow English author insofar as, “knowing so well what she [England] had given him, he was the more tenderly and scrupulously grateful to her for the very reason that she seemed to him to bestow her gifts half in ignorance of their value” (*The Collected Essays* 81).

Environments within Woolf's works are spaces that must be perpetually negotiated as fluctuating states that merge and sever "inner and outer realities" (Paul 4). Though, for Woolf, "separation between self and other was a given," with "individual consciousness" and "the universe outside consciousness" comprising entirely separate realities, there are nevertheless moments of "communication," or instances in which the inner realities of her characters supposedly align with that of the external, however brief and unstable the alignment may be. Furthermore, as crucial as environment in *Orlando* is the relationship between it and the passing of time, which demonstrates the evolution of English culture in particular as embodied by the "men of the past" (Fleishman 144). Woolf first depicts the masses as being literally caught in the Great Frost, petrified and unchanging in their respective actions, the various actions being as mundane as nose-picking and stone throwing (*Orlando* 33). The Elizabethan English countryside, with its blunt extremes, consequently acts as both the passive backdrop to a nation as it was first constructing its own character as well as an agent actively influencing the destinies of those belonging to it.

Bodies of water, too, serve as either vehicles or impediments to the unfolding of Woolf's English history, which the evolving literary movements were determined to tell along the lines of a gender binary and which Woolf sought to complicate through the interweaving of familiar English landmarks within unfamiliar contexts. In one such instance, the biographer describes the River Thames in contradictory terms, at once frozen yet also teeming with immobile life beneath the ice. Critic Fleishman further likens the images of motionless eels and wrecked boats as representing "a state between life and death, partaking of both," and which "serve to crystallize the dominant view of human time in *Orlando*—gelid and turgid, not merely static but dormant, yet hinting possibilities of millennial growth" (144). However, as Woolf so describes the role of

the biographer as one who is required “to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may” (*Orlando* 65), it’s apparent that reaching a sensible understanding of Orlando’s situation is unavoidably frustrated by several intersecting factors, such as the passing of time, the modern reader’s subjective understanding of history, as well as the younger Orlando’s own competing “recollection of his past life” (66). This dilemma is further represented by the river’s sudden thaw and the ensuing pandemonium; formerly stable, it gives way to complexity as it eddies and swirls “like a tortured serpent” (62). The scene is a microcosm of the multiplicities of meaning found in seemingly inert and fixed forms, such as the fluidity of that which is considered historical fact for the biographer and those ambiguities remaining for “the novelist to smooth out” like “crumpled silk and all its implications” (73).

It’s moreover unavoidable that the past is predominately remembered through the lens of masculine action, whose actions were deemed worth documenting, and that the subject matter of English art would subsequently follow as a self-conscious comparison to the deeds of knights and noblemen, thus necessitating Orlando’s search for seclusion to compose more nuanced and measured prose within the anonymity offered by the natural world. Even after her transformation, Orlando retains a quintessential English love of nature, a custom which seemingly transcends the gender binary as, among the Thessalian hills, Orlando finds this love further compounded rather than diluted over time. This fact is all the more illuminating insofar as Woolf inherited feminized depictions of nature, which possibly suggests, as critic Bonnie Scott so does, a deliberate, if obscure, reference to lesbianism (196). Nature in Woolf’s settings is thus a stabilizing element, an external reality in which members of both sexes can reconvene and establish the “unity” that otherwise proves so elusive. Orlando moreover continues the English tradition of comparison to that of other cultures, namely the Thessalian, whose customs Woolf

characterizes as being marked by a mistrust of nature as a cold, indifferent entity and not the source of fertile artistic inspiration Orlando so views it to be (143).

However, love England as she may, Orlando determines that she would never relinquish her freedom; that, “if it meant conventionality, meant slavery, meant deceit, meant denying her love, fettering her limbs, pursing her lips, and restraining her tongue, then she would turn about the ship and set sail once more for the gipsies” (163). Yet, this feminist resolve is short-lived as Orlando then recalls the names comprising the English literary canon, such as those of Shakespeare, Milton, and Marlowe, authors whose legacies are integral to England’s coherency as a nation, with language functioning as “the soul of a nation, and... the crucial criterion of nationality” (Hobsbawm 95). Writing as an English author would thus mean potentially joining that same canon of greatness by a simple association of a shared heritage and language. The cost, however, is precisely as steep as she initially feared. In stark contrast to the independence she enjoyed in Thessaly, feminine experience in England is characterized by its vulnerability and victimhood. Nature, once a welcoming environment, now magnifies feminine helplessness that so marks early women’s literature. The environment offered by England thus paradoxically operates as both a land with ostensibly limitless creative opportunities for women while also predetermining the limitations of experience inevitably informing their work; women may have been allowed an ink and quill, but they were denied the “freedom to think of things in themselves” (*ROO* 39) in favor for that which was of immediate and personal importance in relation to those around them. A woman may wander, as Orlando so does, through the woods rapt in deep contemplation, but the contemplation must naturally lead to a broken ankle, which must in turn lead to her long-anticipated engagement (*Orlando* 250).

As Woolf “believed that the novel was grounded in the sense of place—both as influencing factor upon the author and as setting within the novel itself” (Paul 34), tensions between concepts of self in relation to the environments the self inhabits are never fully resolved. With the closing of the eighteenth century comes the more doubtful age of the nineteenth, during which “All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion” (226). The change proves to be so abrupt and arresting in its peculiarity that it alters the very nature of human relationships as the “sexes drew further and further apart” (229), with the lives of women becoming “a succession of child births,” and thus “The British Empire came into existence.” Butler, citing the thinking of Michel Foucault, so demonstrates through theory what Woolf conveys through narrative: “The task of genealogy, he claims, is ‘to expose a body totally imprinted by history...’ the goal of ‘history’ ...is the ‘destruction of the body’” (176-77); moreover, “Within the metaphors of this notion of cultural values is the figure of history as a relentless writing instrument, and the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for ‘culture’ to emerge” (177). Bodies are thus another means through which the “story” of history is conveyed, with history and culture imposing themselves in direct competition with Woolf’s concept of a single, unimpeded self; there simply is no concept of Orlando without England, just as there is no concept of England without Orlando.

Conclusion

Upon the death of her aunt, Woolf became a woman of financial means and was subsequently in a position to pursue her own ambitions as a writer while also exploring her own divergent sexuality and thus disrupt the patriarchal concept of women’s complacency as wives within the domestic sphere, a privilege which many less fortunate women of her era didn’t share. However, though Woolf’s experimentation has been read as a strategic disruption of such

patriarchal conventions, by remaining ambivalent to the role played by class structure in shaping relationships between men and women, as well as the perceptions she personally held of those of lower classes, it can be argued that she continued the very tradition of exclusion to which all women have been historically subjected. As Butler so cites the thinking of Monique Wittig, “the practical task that women face in trying to establish subjectivity through speech depends on their collective ability to cast off the reifications of sex imposed on them which deform them as partial or relative beings” (159). This tension further demonstrates the reasons for Woolf’s mixed reception as a feminist icon among aspiring female writers and theorists.

Nevertheless, Woolf so describes Orlando as acquiring a dubious form of “subjectivity through speech” by virtue of her class alone: “Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote” (266). Happy as the position may have been for Woolf’s Orlando, it bears comparing to that of Charlotte Brontë’s protagonist, Jane Eyre. Brontë, an author whose work Woolf charged as being weakened by an anger resulting from the restrictions of class (*ROO* 73), breathes further life into Jane who, having already escaped one situation of financial subservience at Thornfield Hall, enters another while in the patronage of St. John. Writing from the passions of one whose ambition was harshly denied her due to her position as a “relative being,” it’s as though Brontë momentarily possesses the form of Jane to clasp both hands upon the shoulders of her readership in exasperation to say: “I know no medium: I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters, antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined resolve” (Brontë 462). Jane’s story thus remains obstinately familiar for modern female readers for whom financial independence proves a far-off dream and patriarchal

dependency a stark reality. For this reason, Brontë was in every sense of her age, and she wrote as one who wisely anticipated that both her contemporary and future female readership would have faced similar restraints, which keeps her work in constant dialogue with that of Woolf's as both authors provide readers with a better understanding of the complexities surrounding women's lives in a centuries-old patriarchal, capitalistic society.

Whether Orlando successfully achieves a so-called androgyny of the mind is, as with any discussion of gender, a matter of perspective. *Orlando* as novel can arguably be read through competing lenses and still maintain its integrity as a compelling work of feminist thinking that disrupts, if not upends, traditional discourses around sex and gender. Perhaps more importantly, the work is a product of the many selves Woolf personally sought to reconcile through the story of her remarkable protagonist, who, by the novel's closing pages, seems to at last come to terms with the evolving nature of her identity by posing the unanswerable question: "how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit?" (308). However, it's the elusive "true self" (310) that remains the wild goose of Woolf's artistic pursuit, and which could never have been attained, try as she might have to promote "a selfhood that goes 'beyond' female identity, which is subsumed in the androgynous ideal" (Rosenman 111).

Butler so describes the "performance" aspect of gender identity as comprised of "acts, gestures, and desire" each of which produces "the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as cause" (185). In other words, the performance imparts "the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (186), which is in turn informed by the tradition of "reproductive heterosexuality." In this sense, attempts in

communicating one's individuality is inevitably informed by external standards and requires a compliance to demands that sense be made of one's individuality along the lines of sex and gender. It furthermore isn't for anyone to suggest that Woolf identified as anything other than female, in terms more in keeping with contemporary terminology of feminist/gender theory of which she would have been unfamiliar. However, it's clear that Woolf took issue with the expectations imparted onto her identity from without on the basis of her perceived sex alone. Inhabiting a body marked outwardly as female, Woolf created in the face of sexism, created in spite of the external factors which predetermined the opportunities and experiences that would be afforded to her. Like the multifaceted Orlando, Woolf took on many competing identities throughout her life; that of wife, author, lover, and woman. Woolf as individual, however, attempted, if only ever in spirit, to rise above the constraining modifiers of her immediate surroundings, which is both her tragedy and her triumph. Hers was a constant struggle of wills between self and society, with its limitless modes of influence; a society, moreover, that will go on proving itself to be "the most powerful concoction in the world" (194) and which will, for better or worse, continue to determine the reception of her work, until, as Orlando so muses in the tombs of his forebearers, "we," too, "that dance and sing above must lie below" (71).

Works Cited

Book Marks. "The First Reviews of Every Virginia Woolf Novel." *Book Marks*, Literary Hub,

24 July 2020, bookmarks.reviews/the-first-reviews-of-every-virginia-woolf-novel/.

Accessed May 7, 2021.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics, 1847, 2006, pp. 462.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990, pp. 9, 12, 23, 33, 159, 176-77, 185, 186.

Christ, Carol. "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House." *A Widening Sphere:*

Changing Roles of Victorian Women, edited by Martha Vicinus, Indiana University Press, 1977, pp. 149, 152.

Conway, Jill. "Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution." *Suffer and Be Still:*

Women in the Victorian Age, edited by Martha Vicinus, Indiana University Press, 1972, pp. 146-47.

Fleishman, Avrom. *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading*, The Johns Hopkins University Press,

1975, pp. 143, 144.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, Second

Edition, 1990, pp. 95.

Marcus, Laura. "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf." *The Cambridge Companion to*

Virginia Woolf, edited by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 230-31.

Millet, Kate. "The Debate over Women: Ruskin vs. Mill." *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the*

Victorian Age, edited by Martha Vicinus, Indiana University Press, 1972, pp. 121, 123-24.

Paul, Janis M. *The Victorian Heritage of Virginia Woolf: The External World in her Novels*, Pilgrim Books, 1987, pp. 4, 34.

Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. *A Room of One's Own: Women Writers and the Politics of Creativity*, Twayne Publishers, 1995. pp. 111.

Ryan, Derek. *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory*, Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2013, pp. 112.

Scott, Bonnie Kime. *In the Hollow of the Wave*, University of Virginia Press, 2012, pp. 196.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Collected Essays and Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Read Books Ltd., 2012, pp. 23, 81.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando: A Biography*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1928.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*, Harcourt Inc., 1929, pp. 35, 39, 73, 97.

Zweig, Stefan. *The World of Yesterday*, translated by Anthea Bell, University of Nebraska Press, 2009, pp. 94-95.